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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Time to Back Away

Further evidence that the Soviet Union has brazenly violated arms control treaties on chemical and biological warfare now comes from the United Nations. Extracts of unreleased UN interviews with Afghan refugees in Pakistan were printed on these pages Monday. The number and consistency of the reports are deeply impressive, and in Afghanistan no one can doubt that Soviet troops are directly involved.

The Afghan accounts, though, introduce a new puzzle. The reports include clouds of yellow smoke, and symptoms that match those reported in Laos and Cambodia, where biological trichothecene toxins have been identified in samples from attack sites. But in Afghanistan, "yellow rain" is not the persistent theme. Instead, the reports return again and again to rotting flesh.

"Bodies decomposed and limbs separated from each other when touched," one doctor reported. "The

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flesh came apart like it was burned and smelled like burned flesh," refugees report. "We found the bodies were as if cooked, flesh was very soft and came apart." And, "their flesh was soft and rotted."

What kind of weapon could conceivably cause such dramatic results?

After death bodies normally decompose through autolysis. Each tissue cell contains proteolytic enzymes, which break down proteins to provide energy for the cell. After death the enzymes attack and dissolve the cell wall. Apparently whatever the Soviets are using in Afghanistan vastly speeds this process.

Proteolytic enzymes come in many varieties, each with highly specific effects. The digestive tract relies on several, pepsin being the most important. Another, papain, is extracted from plants and used as meat tenderizer. Some are synthesized and used in detergents. A proteolytic enzyme is produced by the streptococcus bacteria, helping it to invade cell walls. Others are components of snake venom, where they break down capillary walls and cause internal bleeding.

must constantly negotiate to prove our moral purity to ourselves.

The case for a verifiable agreement, never capable of withstanding much scrutiny, lies in tatters after "yellow rain." The notion has been that the Soviets would have an interest in abiding by arms treaties from fear that we would rearm and raise sanctions if they were caught cheating. Yet the Soviets have in fact been caught cheating on the Biological Weapons Convention, and no sanctions have been imposed. The Reagan administration has acknowledged the Soviet violations, but has not even filed a formal protest under procedures established by the 1972 convention and now opens new arms talks. The lack of a U.S. response is an open invitation to similarly blatant violations of other arms control treaties.

In any event, there is no way to achieve verification of the coming generations of weapons. A strategic cruise missile, for example, is 20 feet long. How could we count the Soviet inventory? Even with on-site inspection, how could we know what the Soviets could hide if they behaved the way they have with biological weapons? We may as well face the reality that to ask for adequate verification is to ask that the Soviet Union cease to be a totalitarian society.

The case for a possible change in the Soviet leadership is more important. Soviet economic problems are growing, and there is always some slim possibility of a Deng Xiaoping decision to come to terms with the West. At the moment, though, the more likely reaction to economic crisis would seem to be using the only asset the Soviet Union has, naked military power. With a change in Soviet leadership and growing economic problems, we must focus on the possibility it may undertake further foreign adventures to divert attention from problems at home.

In any event, we could always start serious negotiations once there was some evidence of a change in the Soviet Union. We thought we saw this in the Khrushchev era, with the de-Stalinization campaign. Indeed, this provided much of the initial impetus for detente and the current round of strategic arms negotiations. But we now know that at the height of detente the Soviets signed the Biological Weapons Convention and proceeded

At this point, one can only speculate about what causes the decomposed bodies reported by the Afghans; no tissues have been collected or analyzed. But both the rapid decomposition of the bodies and the sudden and profuse bleeding reported by the Hmong in Laos could plausibly be explained by a combination of the trichothecene poisons and a proteolytic enzyme to shoot them through the body.

This is close to a standard science-fiction horror: To "Star Wars," where weapons burn away flesh and leave bleached bones. To "Raiders of the Lost Ark," which shows faces dissolving into death heads. The cocktail of trichothecenes and proteolytic enzymes is, of course, only a speculation. But at the very least, it raises the question of what else the Russians have cooked up in the laboratories they pledged to dismantle when they signed the Biological Weapons Convention of 1972.

What manner of men rule the Soviet Union? The geriatric generation at the top of the Soviet elite found its formative experience in the great purge trials of the 1930s. Those stamped by Stalin's paranoia are now passing from the scene, but no comforting technocrat is emerging as Brezhnev's putative heir. Instead, the next head of the Soviet Union may well be Uri Andropov, who made his mark suppressing the 1956 Hungarian revolution and served until just the other day as head of the KGB.

Should we be surprised that such men would view the Biological Weapons Convention with utter contempt? Can we suppose they would treat any other arms agreement differently? Can we expect them to negotiate on the basis of mutual interest, or solely to seek opportunities for advantage through evasion and cheating? With Soviet forces dumping chemical weapons on the Afghan resistance, could we justify even coming to a table where the head of the KGB will mock us with homilies of peace?

Under what rationale do we pursue arms talks with the Soviets? What do we hope to achieve? There are essentially three answers. The first and narrowest is that despite Soviet duplicity some useful agreements may be possible where verification permits. The second and broadest is that at some point the character of the Soviet leadership may change, and we should not miss this historic opportunity. The third and, in practice, most powerful is purely political—that we

to produce the very weapons they had promised to forgo. Surely the next time we are entitled to wait for a little evidence of good faith.

That brings us to the political imperatives, which have dominated President Reagan's trip to Europe. He has offered new arms proposals—the "zero option" on European missiles, deep reductions in strategic weapons and now a pullback of ground troops in Europe—and he has expressed his agreement with the "goals" of anti-nuclear demonstrators. By offering these tokens of good faith, he hopes to mollify the demonstrators, and no doubt eventually to show that it is the Soviets who block arms agreements.

The cost, though, is yielding the moral high ground. Why should the American President have to prove he has stopped beating his wife? American nuclear forces have been reduced in sheer explosive power, have broken no treaties and have killed no one since the end of World War II. The deaths in Asia from biological weapons are not some best-selling nightmare; they are real, with actual people choking to death in their own blood, with actual bodies rotting overnight.

Rather than plunging deeper into arms talks to mollify protesters, Mr. Reagan should be laying the political groundwork for drawing back from negotiations pending some change in Soviet behavior. His proposals are on the table, and would represent real disarmament. Precisely for that reason no one thinks the Soviets will be truly interested, and the pressures are already building for Mr. Reagan to negotiate with himself.

The central task is to deflate rather than feed the expectation that arms agreements will solve our problems. Why can't simple truths be uttered? The prospect for meaningful agreement with the Soviets is slim to negligible. It's time for our attention to shift from how to achieve an arms agreement to how to build a viable military deterrent. The true outrage to morality is not inanimate lumps of steel and plutonium buried in Montana, but the sordid deaths of Hmong tribesmen and Afghan freedom fighters in Asia.

Our politicians, including Mr. Reagan, shrink from these truths because they fear the public does not want to hear them. They should stop underestimating democracy. Surely, electorates at home and abroad can understand this position: When the Soviets are breaking old arms agreements, it's no time to get excited about negotiating new ones.